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Letter

Dear Friend,

I came to America with my mother in 1945 after I had just turned 6, because my father had sent us money to come over to America. He had written us many letters informing us about the many educational and economic opportunities that were offered in the states. We were lucky because the Communist Party in China was just coming into power and if we had stayed, our family would never have been able to have the opportunities that we believed we could find in America. These economic opportunities meant income to my parents but the idea of moving away to a foreign land where I didn't understand the language and culture scared me.

Unfortunately, our other family members could not accompany us to see America and all the opportunities it promised. My father did not intend to stay in America but he was glad that we were together as a family and could send money back to our family in China. When I first arrived in Chicago I had no idea how to find my way around to a local grocery store or even to a park because I did not speak English particularly well. I often resorted to looking for people who looked like me for help and listening for others that spoke Toi Shan or Cantonese.

The first place I remember seeing was the "Chinatown" of Chicago where my uncle and his wife owned a grocery store. My father had been a doctor back in our hometown of Canton, but when he arrived in America he had to take whatever job he could find and so he became a cook for a chop-suey house on Clark and Vanburen called Joy Yet Lo. Sometimes he wouldn't get home until it was past midnight and he would rise at 7 in the

morning to go to work again. My mother worked at a laundry business just below our apartment so I loved visiting her after I came home from school and saying hi to all the aunties and uncles that worked with her. Even today, I remember the smell of bleach and cotton that would alert me my mom was home.

We shared our small and run-down apartment with another family in order to reduce the cost of rent. Their daughter's name was Ping-Lu and throughout our grammar school years we would walk to school together but we had to go to separate classes because of our age difference. This separation always made me sad because the students in the class were not interested in becoming my friend and looked down at my way of dressing and talking. Even my teachers seemed impatient when I didn't grasp the concepts as quickly as the other "white" students.

When I was old enough to go to high school, I had learned to speak English almost fluently, although I didn't always understand all the American songs, movies or jokes that my friends introduced to me. I began making more non-Chinese friends at school, although there were still cliques at the local neighborhood hangouts, they seemed to make more of an effort to understand my culture and language. I never considered dating a non-Chinese boy largely because I had seen the ridicule suffered by the few inter-racial couples that expectedly disbanded under the pressure.

During the seventies, I began meeting more and more Chinese people my age who had gone through very similar experiences to mine. They understood exactly how difficult it was to find a job even though we had the same university degrees as the white or even Japanese students. Little did I realize when I first immigrated to America that what was

familiar to me was foreign to Americans and what was foreign to me was the culture and backbone of American culture that I had to learn in order to survive and succeed.